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ABSTRACT

A university professor and director of a writing program found many examples of what he terms "colonialism" during his thirty years of teaching experiences in countries around the world. One such example was a former pupil in Hong Kong struggling to make her students memorize a poem called "London Snow" ("snow" is an abstract concept in Hong Kong) so that they could win a contest to be judged by the British, homesick for snowy England. In Georgia, the professor was asked to revise student compositions in ungrammatical but forceful black English for a school newspaper while the students played for three weeks. Impressing the administration was a necessity, rather than teaching the students how to revise for themselves. In London, poor inner city students insisted on the superior qualities of the Rolls Royce or Jaguar over the Cadillac, even though they rarely got to ride in cars of any kind--their patriotism served so easily to divert them from more important lessons. The final irony occurred in rural China where the Chinese and Americans have a joint venture in a new hotel. The Chinese government hired the persons who spoke the best English, not those who were the best qualified as cooks, servers, or problem solvers. Based on these experiences, the professor has come to equate the idea of literacy not with a set of skills to be learned but rather with a certain behavior to be achieved: passive obedience to authority. (NKA)

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Abusing Literacy to Colonize Minds:

Eight Scenes from a Travesty

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At 29, I decided to leave Britain for the United States, in 1966. My luck on the annual academic lottery stuck me as a graduate assistant in a sleepy Southern university more famous for its football team than for its scholarship. My heavy Oxbridgean accent (clinch your molars and route the sounds through the wisdom teeth) probably gave away my mood. Just before the end of my first class, I turned to the board. As I wrote the assignment, I said (in a heavy Southern dialect): "If y'all have any questions about this material, you can meet me in my office in Clark Hall any morning between 9 and 11."

I turned round. No one smiled. All glared, as if I had mocked them.

Again at the board, I wrote: "Which dialect is mine by birthright?

Raise your hands. British____ Southern____ "

Everyone mistook me for an alien. As we talked long after the bell, one student said, "But Mr. Crew, I thought that nobody who could talk that purty, that convincingly would never admit to bein from heah!"

Alabama became a state in 1819, 43 years after the 13 colonies declared independence from Britain. To prepare for their first papers, my students telephoned dozens of stores and offices to ask for routine information, first in British, then a few days later, in Southern. They documented that the speech of the colonizer uniformly privileged persons 189 years after colonialism had allegedly left America.

Scene 2. Hong Kong. 1986.

Hong Kong, one of Britain's last colonies, is the third largest banking center in the world. The British choose the governor and most of the other top officials who control five and one-half million people, over 95 percent Chinese. Only 30,000 people vote, when allowed to, for a few lesser officials. Resident foreigners may vote. Of those who now draft the laws to control Hong Kong after China resumes sovereignty in 1997, most hold foreign passports or other get-away papers.

The Hong Kong government taxes millionaires no more than anyone else, (17 and 1/2 percent) and provides no social security. The Chinese routinely ask new acquaintances "How many square feet do you have?" Many families of six report about 300. Over 2000 people sleep on the streets; and most people earn under US\$217 per month. (Winchester and "Good Times, Bad Times")

A former student summoned me to the canteen to help her with a text. She teaches in a secondary school, and wanted her students to win a contest performing a poem.

Some sat shirtless in the hot October night. Over the loud fans, I could hardly hear myself when I read aloud the poem she gave me. I had never seen it, Bridges' "London Snow." I dutifully stumbled at the long string of appositional adjectives, and try as much as I could, I never reserved enough breath for the many participles which end lines in the first half of the poem. The form forcefully, demandingly, mimics the falling, falling, falling of the snow.

"But this is so difficult even for a native," I sweated.

"Yes," she said. .

"Do you understand manna?" I asked "No."

I told her about Exodus. "And now you can see how Bridges's 'crystal manna' envisions the spiritual dimensions of the magic which the little boys enjoy as they taste the snow...." She looked blankly.

"Have you ever seen snow?" I asked. She nodded up and down.

"Really? In northern China?"

"No, on a postcard."

"Have any of your students seen snow?"

"I doubt it."

"But much of the poem depends on your seeing a very ephemeral moment, that even some snowfalls bypass, the part just when the snow has made 'unevenness even,' when no light has melted and begun to compact it. You might take them a Slurpy from the Seven Eleven but that's not it at all. That's ice. That's compacted.... This is about snow the first thing in the morning, when no wind has disturbed it even slightly. I remember watching Nigerians in Beijing go mad at their first sight of snow; they ran in circles grasping it as it swirled. But that was dry snow. This damp snow rests gently....."

She looked at me trying to grasp how this could possibly help her get a prize for her students, who have little knowledge of English yet.

"But why did you choose THIS poem?! " I said.

I caught her off guard, she forgot the usual deference. She and another former student blurted out together: "But I/she DIDN'T. I/She WOULD NEVER. The British will judge the contest, and the authorities have told us that the British are like this, that they long for the snows of home while they live here!"

For their next project, we asked our own students to read Kipling's "White Man's Burden," Eliot's essay on Kipling, Orwell's essay on Eliot's

essay, and Stalky's speech to the Kipling Society (Dunsterville). Then, they had to prepare their own speech to give to the Kipling Society, using their authority as one of the "burdens."

Before I even left class with their floppy disks, one of my colleagues, newly graduated from Yale, emerging himself fully in the Cantonese language and culture, passed by my window, and said, "Sorry to interrupt, but I must talk to you. Several in my tutorial missed the point and, without any irony, apologized for burdening the British! They claimed that the Chinese do not deserve the colonizers' kindness and generosity!"

Released from another prison, Byron warned,

So much a long communion tends
To make us what we are:--even I
Regained my freedom with a sigh. (340)

Scene 3. The Professionals.

"The Uses of Literacy: A Writer's Work In and Out of the Academy" proclaimed the theme the 1987 Conference on College Composition and Communication. Beware, warns Jay Robinson:

To think of literacy as a set of skills, and to think of these skills as basic, as mere rudiments, is to misconceive it badly, perhaps maliciously. The misconception of the real competencies involved in achieving literacy has harmed all students much, but most of all those students whom we characterize as most needful of special help. (484)

Ira Schor warns that recent studies, such as "Literacy: Profiles of Young Adults" issued by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, "tend to blame the victim and distract public attention from the real

crisis in the schools and in the economy" (quoted by Pincus, 9).

Paul Kelley and David Wallace look at literacy in adult basic education:

The goal of this curriculum and "andragogy" is not ultimately a critical and imaginative literacy but an etiquette, an ability to perform tasks whose value refers not to the live experiences of the student but to the institution of education. (142)

[T]he student's willingness to perform literacy tasks, to adopt good study habits, to respect authority and the rules of educational institutions, etc., are the values of employability. Employment is not the purpose of literacy but rather a certain behavior: passive obedience to authority. (146)

Throughout 30 years as a teacher, I have often assumed, naively, that institutions hire me to enable students, rather than to subdue them, to teach them to ask their own questions rather than to memorize my answers or my questions.

Scene 4. South Carolina.

1971: A Dean summoned me to his office above my classroom in our small black college:

"Crew, you're making trouble. Several of your other white colleagues stormed here a few hours ago to complain that you harass them!"

"What!?" I asked.

"They claim one of your students asked them more than 20 questions

about the Black community here--the names of the main funeral homes, churches, restaurants, cemeteries....which we blacks use in this town. I think I see what you're getting at, but can't you bail me out. I've got enough headaches right now trying to get the Methodists to fork up for some of our bills like they promised...."

I had told the student not to throw at me any more glib, general complaints about how whites exploited blacks. "Prove it," I badgered him. "Make the case stick. You're not in a bull session. We're not here to pool our ignorance or our feelings. This is college. You're a lawyer in court. I'm a sleepy judge. Awaken me, or lose your case!"

He proved that most white teachers on the campus did not live and move within the black community they purported to serve. The missionaries, stung, squealed. I remember that student's paper 16 years later. I don't remember hundreds of safer ones.

Scenes 5 and 6. Georgia

1977 or 78. Another black college. "We're gonna run you off the road, you.....!" "We're gonna cut off your...." Any true-blooded American can fill in the epithets that the anonymous callers used. I don't want to upstage my paper.

Again a student provoked them. Again, I had told the student to substantiate his claims that whites oppressed him. He looked at how white people made the only big money in this town of 12000, with 60 percent black majority. They manufactured school busses. Then he dropped off with store owners all over town a form with just one question: "Since Fort Valley makes most of its money out of bussing, do you approve of bussing in Fort Valley?"

"That's the damnedest illogic I've ever heard!" shouted the editor of

the local paper when he called me in. "What the hell are you teaching them out there?"

"Sounds like a perfectly good question to me," I said, "though I haven't seen it before now. The paper is not due until next week. DO you approve of bussing in Fort Valley?"

"The two issues aren't related," he claimed in the front-page story he wrote about the affair.

The student did not get to write that paper. No one mailed his form to him. With all the furor, he felt it unwise to fetch them. I asked him to photocopy the editor's cover story instead, and told the class that anytime anyone could use research effectively enough to get on the front page of the paper, that person also would earn an A. No person walking down the street waving a stick ever scared the powers-that-be nearly so much as one bright black student with a question cogently put.

Note: that assignment succeeded with that student not because of the teacher or because of the student's mastery of "basic English," so much as because of the student's courage, analysis, and verbal dexterity. I only prompted, gave him permission, and got out of the way. Later I drank coffee with him when the bigots mustered.

Eureka too rarely serves as the interjection of education. Most prefer the comfortable verbs-- train, process, instill, coach, discipline, inform, assign, and instruct. Too few inspire, spark, provoke, enable, prod, arouse, whet, and quicken.

At no time have I ever grasped the extent and the complexity of our task more clearly than when I worked at Emory in Upward Bound with some of the brightest and most marginal students in the nation, in the summer of 1971. The program leader asked teachers and principals in the most

isolated parts of Georgia to look at the students from their most destitute families and make two lists, the best students and the trouble-makers. They did. He chose the trouble-makers.

For 11-12 years these students had sat in schools, devalued. In any one paper they wrote prose as vivid as any I had ever read--but only if I deciphered it, as an inexact record of speech. They had mastered few of the conventions by which to commit ideas to paper effectively.

I had little success when I urged them to revise. They had written once and for all. At best, they wanted me to correct their mistakes, perhaps even to scold them. For the first time, a teacher valued WHAT they wrote, and they seemed to like the class. But they also suggested that I could not possibly understand how difficult and finally unimportant it was for them to master HOW TO write. They had seen no one win success that way.

Near the end of the summer, the director called me in. "I've got to prove our worth so we can get funds for next year. From now on you will earn your salary by helping me do it."

"What do you mean?" I asked, confused.

"You put together some of those papers they have written for you, into a newspaper. We will give them copies. We will give copies to the administration. It's as simple as that."

"That's not simple," I warned. "You won't get a dime if the Emory administration reads what these students write. They'll suggest you should train them to enter third grade, not college! It's not the ideas, but the literacy....."

"That's why I hired you. You know that stuff. You take their writing and put together a newspaper to keep us afloat. I have cancelled all your other classes so you can do it. Now get to work."

From their own words, I discovered the hard diamond of their sense of self-worth. I polished that stone to delight every beholder three weeks later. "Liked your comment about the crazy crackers!" Denise shouted to Dianne. "Man, you shore put the stuff together," Bill told Don..... "They wrote powerfully," a dean told me at the final banquet. "Quite good."

In those three weeks I learned as much about how to revise as I have learned in any three years, but I learned even more about our institutions and our students. I preserved their words, as I sorted, deleted, compressed, juxtaposed.... Meanwhile, my students played, without a teacher.

The praise they won lasted no longer than the copies of the newsprint, at best a few weeks. The experiences I had have served me for years. I did not merely proofread. I selected and preserved Black English in its most forceful registers. Often I arranged sentences to make their ungrammaticality zap the administrators whom I wanted their words to impress.... How much better if I could have taught them how to do that.

Scene 7. London

"American cars are tinny!" the students often baited me when I taught in Penge, a slum eight miles south of the Thames, in the new Borough of Bromley, in 1965-66.

"Yes," I sighed.

"Cadillac can't touch a Rolls or a Jag, can it, sir?"

"No," I admitted. I shifted from "grass" (pronounced in American) to "grass" (pronounced in British), lest I remind them again that I am American and prompt another question about the Statue of Liberty.

Few of these lads would ever ride in an automobile of any kind, except

perhaps a taxi to their wedding, or, at the end, a hearse. How ironic that "patriotism" served so easily to divert them from more important lessons.

The school seemed designed to prompt this nonsense. We had no textbooks. I saw 305 pupils each week, but each pupil saw at least two other teachers of English. The English Department existed on paper only. We never met my entire year there.

"Set them copy work; that's all they're good for," colleagues advised in the staff room.

The students clashed with the faculty vividly in the parking lot after school every day, to see who could get away first. Thereby Britain assured a steady stream of people to sweep the streets and punch tickets on the busses.

Scene 8. Rural China, March, 1987

The phone rings. My spouse calls.

"How do you like the new job?" I ask.

"I'm learning lots about the hotel business," he says. "I like most of it, especially the students. We're living on a military base and teaching English to those the government has chosen as potential staff when the new hotel opens this summer. The students work hard, because they know only a few will get the coveted jobs. The Chinese government and the Americans have a joint venture: Americans will own and run the hotel and receive all profits for 15 years. Then they will leave everything to China.

"What don't you like?"

"It's clear the government and the hotel won't choose the people best qualified to do the jobs."

"Why not?" I ask.

"They want only the people with the most correct English, not those who know how to serve people, to cook the best, or to solve problems. They will eliminate a person perfectly able to get across a point in English, if they find another with better grammar. They want the manageable ones, and though they don't say so, it seems that they identify those as the people most willing to slave at the least significant matters of 'correct' language."

This travesty continues everywhere.

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